20. OCEANIC AND OTHER BIRDS SEEN ON TWO RECENT TRIPS BETWEEN COLOMBO AND ADEN IN 1951

I was so interested to read Mr. W. W. A. Phillip's paper on the Wilson's Storm Petrels, Shearwaters and other sea birds in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean [*J.B.N.H.S.* Vol. 49 (3)], that I was moved to keeping a careful diary of the birds seen between Colombo and Aden on two recent voyages.

It was interesting to compare the complete absence of birds seen in February with the very large migration that was observed moving in a southerly direction on August 4, 1951. This migration was presumably being undertaken by birds leaving their breeding grounds somewhere in the Persian Gulf.

The following are extracts from my diaries:—

R.M.S. 'Orcades'

Homeward Voyage—February 28th to March 5th 1951.

February 28. Sailed from Colombo at midnight. No birds seen across the Indian Ocean at all.

March 4. 09.00 hrs. ship was off Cape Gardafui—quite a few Red Sea Blackheaded Gulls seen and 4 Bluefaced Boobys. There were also a few solitary terns (unidentified).

March 5. Entered Red Sea—Lesser Blackbacked Gulls; Herring Gulls (quite a few in juvenile plumage); 2 Red Sea Blackheaded Gulls and 1 Redbilled Tropic Bird seen.

R.M.S. 'Orion'

Outward Voyage. August 3 to August 8, 1951.

August 3. Sea calm with a swell, weather hazy and cloudy.

09.30 hrs. 2 different species of moths seen on board together with a locust.

09.35-09.50 hrs. A large flock of Wilson's Storm Petrel seen sitting upon the sea with others flying around very like Common Swifts skimming the water.

10.10 hrs. The ship disturbed another large flock of Wilson's Storm Petrels.

10.30 hrs. Another large flock of Wilson's Storm-Petrels seen.

10.55 hrs. Red Sea Blackheaded Gull was following the ship.

11.30 hrs. Ship arrived off Aden. Aden Gulls; juvenile Blackbacked Gulls were seen and a Peregrine was seen to make half-hearted stoop at the Aden Gulls.

16.00 hrs. Ship sailed from Aden. A Brown Booby was seen fishing just outside the harbour; it dropped into the water from quite a considerable height and was totally submerged.

A large number of Caspian Terns (? Black head; dark grey mantle; flight feathers appeared lighter than rest of wing; underparts white; tail fairly long; bill orange.)

17.50 hrs. A dark chocolate coloured shearwater (Wedgetailed probably) with a flock of Wilson's Storm Petrels.

18.10 hrs. A solitary black storm petrel was seen, but not identified.

August 4. Ship's position at noon Lat. 12°53′N, Long. 51°21′E. Sea calm with long swell. In the afternoon the wind freshened and the sea became choppy becoming rough.

07.45 hrs. A solitary Redbilled Tropic Bird seen.

08.40 hrs. A solitary Palefooted Shearwater seen. (This was a light brown bird with long pointed wings which it flapped frequently; it moved very fast.)

09.30 hrs. A Wedgetailed Shearwater was seen. (This appeared smaller and darker chocolate than the last species; the flight feathers were noted as being nearly black in colour.)

Wedgetailed Shearwaters were seen throughout the morning together with a couple of Palefooted Shearwaters.

10.40 hrs. 4 Bluefaced Boobys were seen.

15.30 hrs. Large flocks of Dusky Shearwaters were seen. It was quite apparent that the ship was cutting across a very large southerly migration of birds as the number seen was impossible to estimate. The following species were seen in this order of predominance:—Wedgetailed Shearwaters, Palefooted Shearwaters, Dusky Shearwaters, Sooty Terns, Brownwinged Terns and the odd Aden Gulls. This migration was still continuing until approximately 18.30 hrs. when the volume of birds noticeably slackened; as the ship was averaging about 19 knots per hour we had proceeded approximately 57 nautical miles since the start of the migration. The depth of front can therefore be estimated at 57 miles across a very close mass of birds. It was, indeed, a most interesting spectacle.

18.00 hrs. The ship passed Socotra.

August 5. Ship's position at noon Lat. 11°27′N, Long. 59°10′E. Sea rough; strong S.W. monsoon wind blowing; weather fine and clear.

07.00 hrs. A solitary Wedgetailed Shearwater seen.

11.30 hrs. A solitary Pomatorhine Skua (the white markings on the upper sides of the wings were very prominently noticeable); a Wedgetailed Shearwater was keeping company with this skua. During the morning 21 Wedgetailed Shearwaters were seen all of which were solitary birds.

14.10 hrs. Wilson's Storm Petrel (a solitary small petrel which was black with a white rump and underparts was seen).

16.40 hrs. A solitary tropic bird was seen, it was too far for definite identification. Another solitary Wilson's Storm Petrel was also seen.

18.00 hrs. Wilson's Storm Petrel—solitary bird. From 14.00 hrs. to 18.00 hrs. 9 Wedgetailed Shearwaters, all of them solitary, were seen.

August 5. Ship's position at noon Lat. 9°29′N, Long. 66°35′E. Sea calmer with moderate long swell; wind had lessened considerably; weather fine and clear.

08.00 hrs. Wedgetailed Shearwater, solitary bird seen.

08.20 hrs. Palefooted Shearwater seen (this bird was much lighter in colour).

10.55 hrs. 2 Palefooted Shearwaters flew in front of the bows and settled on the water.

11.40 hrs. Another Palefooted Shearwater seen.

11.45 hrs. 3 Wedgetailed Shearwaters.

11.55 hrs. A Redbilled Tropic Bird was disturbed by the ship and rose up from under the bows, giving me an excellent view. It had a short tail and no streamers.

During the afternoon a further 9 Wedgetailed Shearwaters were seen at odd intervals.

August 7. Ship's position at noon Lat. 7°56′N, Long. 74°13′E. Sea calm with light swell; wind slight; weather fine and cloudy.

09.50 hrs. A single Palefooted Shearwater seen. The Palefooted Shearwaters do not appear so graceful as the Wedgetailed as their flight is heavier with considerable flapping of their wings. The Wedgetailed swerve and glide with great speed along the troughs of the waves and appear to keep closer to the surface of the water.

14.00 hrs. A Redbilled Tropic Bird seen. (This bird was complete with streamers in its tail.) No other birds were seen all day.

August 8. Ship arrived Colombo at 06.00 hrs.

Summary

The dates of the voyages undertaken by Mr. W. W. A. Phillips were: homeward—11th to 19th July 1949 and, outward—13th to 20th January 1950; whereas those of mine were: homeward—28th February to 5th March 1951 and, outward—3rd to 8th August 1951.

In January 1950 Mr. Phillips saw the following species of birds: Lesser Blackbacked Gull; Herring Gull; Aden Sooty Gull; Large Crested Tern; Aden Gull; Blackheaded Gull; Dusky Shearwaters; Redbilled Tropic Bird; phalaropes; Wedgetailed Shearwater; Pomatorhine Skua; Brown Booby; Whitetailed Tropic Bird and Brownheaded Gull. The majority of these birds were seen in the Gulf of Aden and only tropic birds were met within the Indian Ocean. In March 1951 I saw no birds whilst crossing the Indian Ocean; this fact, I consider, was due to most species having left the open ocean for their breeding grounds.

Mr. Phillips saw quite a few shearwaters in the Gulf of Aden, which is comparatively close to land to the north and south; these birds may have been moving slowly to the north in the vicinity of the Persian Gulf to breed. I saw no phalaropes on my trip.

It would be interesting to ascertain the local breeding times of these species mentioned as this may explain the reason why so few birds were seen by me. Is it possible that the tropic birds breed at a later date than the other species? Alexander gives the nearest breeding grounds of the Redbilled Tropic Bird as the islands in the Persian Gulf and, the Whitetailed Tropic Bird as on the Mascarine, Seychelles and Andaman Islands; which may account for the reason why the Whitetailed Tropic Bird was seen by Mr. Phillips in the eastern section of the Indian Ocean.

Mr. Phillips expresses his surprise at seeing so many shearwaters off Colombo in July 1949; I also saw quite a few in August 1951. In view of the large southerly movement seen by me on 4th August it may be possible that the birds seen by Mr. Phillips were early breeders or non-breeding birds.

Alexander states that the Wedgetailed Shearwaters breed at the Seychelles and Mauritus, which makes it difficult to explain why I

saw so many moving in a southerly direction across the Gulf of Aden. I feel certain that these birds must have been returning to the open ocean from their breeding grounds, otherwise I am at a loss to explain the reasons for such a large movement. Again I am at a loss to explain the presence of Palefooted Shearwaters as Alexander gives their breeding locality as the western coast of Australia, the North island of New Zealand and Lord Howe Island.

On 18th July 1949 Mr. Phillips witnessed a large movement of Sooty Terns flying in a south-westerly direction, these terns were also present in the very large movement seen by me on 4th August 1951, but were definitely in the minority.

The species of birds met on both Mr. Phillips's and my trip appear to be the same with, of course, a difference in concentration. The large movement seen by me on 4th August was a truly remarkable sight.

Mr. Phillips stated that on 19th July 1949 he saw many Wilson's Storm Petrels that appeared to be in moult with ragged plumage; although I saw many of these birds in August 1951 I did not notice any with ragged plumages.

KUTTAPITIYA,
PELMADULLA, CEYLON C. E. NORRIS
October 17, 1951.

REFERENCES

Alexander, W. B. (1928): Birds of the Ocean.
Phillips, W. W. A. (1950): Wilson's Storm Petrels, Shearwaters and other sea birds in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean. *Journ. Bom. Nat. Hist. Soc.* **49** (3); 503.

21. BIRDS ATTACKING THEIR REFLECTIONS

I was greatly interested in the three communications on this subject in the *Journal* [Vol. 50 (1) 171-174]. May I make a further comment? I am glad to note that my old friend Mr. Hamid Ali has had a parallel experience to my own with the Large Grey Babbler in Delhi. Mr. Cumberlege has, I think, misunderstood me. It is quite well known that birds will attack their own reflections in a mirror or in a window. Such instances have been published again and again. Experiments have been carried out with Blackbirds and other species, and convincing evidence has been produced to show that it is the sight of the reflection that causes the attack. I was not questioning this at all; I was only questioning whether it was the right explanation in the case of the babbler attacking a hub-cap.

On this essential point the long note from Mr. H. G. Acharya, recording a very similar experience with Jungle Babblers (*Turdoides terricolor*) is of the greatest value and interest. It appears that Mr. Acharya had not read my note, and did not know how closely parallel his observations were to mine and those of my friends in Delhi. But there are important differences. First, at Ahmedabad it appears that the habit is confined to Jungle Babblers; Large Grey Babblers do not do it, though they are present. In Delhi, though both species